

BLESSING WITHOUT MEASURE

by Ray C. Stedman

In previous messages of this series we have stood together under the searchlight of our Lord's own words about possessions. We have listened as he has put the matter into proper perspective, and he has highlighted the continual choice that we must make between things and deeds, treasures on earth and treasures in heaven, between the passing and the permanent, between waste and worth. In one of those tremendously insightful parables that only he can tell, he shows us that giving is a barometer to our living; that as we give we gain some insight, some degree of measurement to the quality of spiritual life present.

Then as we moved on to Paul, in First Corinthians 16 we examined the necessary motives for Christian giving. There must be an inward impulse, the impulse of an indwelling presence and an outward authentic need making its appeal to us, plus a theological conviction. We must act, not by pressure, not by emotional pull, but by a sane, sensible conviction arrived at through the Scriptures, that giving is an integral part of the Christian life. Then there were those practical procedures that Paul brought out beautifully. There must be regularity in giving: "on the first day of every week," {1 Cor 16:2a RSV}. We do not necessarily give every first day, but we are to determine our gift on the first day of the week. Then, giving is to be universal: "each of you," {1 Cor 16:2b RSV}. Let every one, without exception, give, rich or poor, young or old. There are no exceptions here because God wants to bless each one, and giving is a necessary prerequisite to further blessing. It is also to be thoughtful, premeditated, determined at home beforehand. Not impulsive giving, but thoughtfully, deliberate. It is, further, proportionate: "as God has blessed you." We saw all of this in our previous studies.

Now we wish to concern ourselves with the great treatise on giving in Second Corinthians, the eighth and ninth chapters. Here Paul paints for us in bold, broad strokes the characteristics of true Spirit-prompted, Spirit-led giving. All of us give in some way or another. Young or old, all of us undoubtedly give to some cause or other, if only to give to the Red Cross in order to keep the collectors at bay. But all giving is by no means Christian giving. That is what Paul makes clear in these chapters. The motives that prompt our giving and the procedures by which we give are entirely personal and private. No one but the giver can know them. We may be giving to silence a guilty conscience, or to maintain a reputation, but there is no way others can distinguish a Spirit-prompted gift from a self-centered gift. There are, however, certain distinctive traits by which the giver himself can clearly distinguish Christian giving from anything less. These Paul gives us in these two chapters.

Americans love to take personal achievement tests; you find many in magazines these days. Who has not run across one, and taken a pencil to start evaluating himself? Here is one you can take entitled, *Is My Giving Christian?* Paul had gone through Macedonia, preaching the gospel at the cost of great persecution. (Remember the Philippian prison, and Thessalonica, and Berea where he had been driven out of town and these Macedonian churches had heard of the need of the saints in Jerusalem?) There was a famine in Judea that had caused great distress among the Christians in Jerusalem. Severe persecution breaking out had also deprived many of them of their possessions. Word had spread to the churches in Asia and other places of the need of these Christians. In Macedonia they had heard of this desperate need. Although they themselves were going through a great test of affliction and extreme poverty, nevertheless, Paul says, despite their own pressing needs they overflowed with a wealth of liberality to meet the needs of the church in Jerusalem. Perhaps it was not a large amount in total, but it was a tremendous amount in view of the extreme poverty that these people were suffering themselves. Paul says they gave of their means, and even beyond their means, in order to meet the needs of the Jerusalem saints, so much so, he says, that they came "begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints."

Here was something that Paul was reluctant to encourage them in, knowing how much in need they were themselves, how poverty-stricken they were. But they came, stirred up from within, and said to Paul, "Won't you please do us the favor of taking up a collection?" What an encouraging thing this must have been to the

heart of Paul! What an encouraging thing it would be to the heart of any preacher to have people come and say, "We can't wait for the offering!" In this remarkable picture from Macedonia we see what is the first unmistakable mark of true Christian giving, a liberality which is marked by enthusiasm. Enthusiastic giving is Christian giving. A little later on in this same section Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver," {2 Cor 9:7 RSV}. The word "cheerful" is the same root from which our word "hilarious" is derived. God loves hilarious giving.

Do not misinterpret that; that does not mean a spendthrift. He is not talking about giving like a drunken sailor, simply throwing money about. He is speaking of the joy that is inherent in the act of giving when the spirit is so moved to participate in the work of God that the gift is given with hilarious enthusiasm. That is what you see here in Macedonia.

I will never forget a woman coming to me a number of years ago with a large check in her hand which she gave to me. With tears in her eyes she said, "Oh, Mr. Stedman, I am so grateful that God has given me the privilege of giving!" Here was one who had caught the very atmosphere and spirit of true Christian giving.

Giving must not be reluctant. We are not to give because we are forced to. It is to be with liberality, perhaps even, as in the case of these Macedonians, coming out of a background of sheer, stark, poverty. But the heart is so full it simply covets the privilege of giving. That is in full accord with the divine example of giving that parallels and explains this human example, mentioned in Verse 9,

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

That is liberality, is it not? A liberality marked with enthusiasm.

The second characteristic that Paul gives us is an exhortation; his first was an example, his second is an exhortation. You will find it in Verses 10-12. Paul writes to these Corinthians and says,

And in this matter I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what year you began not only to do but to desire, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not. {2 Cor 8:10-12 RSV}

It appears that the Christians in the city of Corinth were the first to respond to the need in Jerusalem. When the news reached this city of the desperate plight of those saints, there was an immediate response. The Christians of Corinth got together and gave a pledge of help. Very likely it was a definite amount that they promised to give for this collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem. Paul used this enthusiasm on their part, this zeal, this early pledge, in encouraging and challenging other Christians around. Look at the ninth chapter, the first two verses. He says,

It is superfluous for me to write to you about the offering for the saints [you already know about that] for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia [that is the province where Corinth was located] has been ready since last year; {2 Cor 9:1-2a RSV}

He had been boasting of the readiness of these people to give, but now they had let him down. There had been a complete failure in fulfillment. The promise was immediate but there was no performance. Paul is now writing to them exhorting them. Notice how he puts it, "in this matter I give my advice." This is no command, there is never to be any pressure that demands anything of a Christian. "I give my advice," he says, "I want to point out some things about this." His exhortation is to that which is the second mark of true Christian giving, an integrity with is evident in fulfillment. Not only is there enthusiastic liberality to be involved in our giving, there must be an integrity about it.

Was it wrong for these Corinthian Christians to make this pledge? There are some who tell us this is the case.

They say it is wrong for Christians to pledge. These Christians, they say, should never have made this promise because, if one makes a promise and then is unable to fulfill it, God will hold him to account for it. Was that the case here? I do not think so. Not only is a reluctance to make a promise to God an evidence of lack of faith (which it surely is), but it is also a refusal to credit God with the understanding and patience we look for in earthly creditors. God is not a hardhearted Shylock, demanding his pound of flesh. Yet that is the attitude we seem to take when we feel it is wrong to make a promise or a pledge. God makes allowances for unforeseeable circumstances and for a temporary failure to fulfill. Surely this is what Paul means in Verse 12:

For if the readiness is there, [he says,] it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not. {2 Cor 8:12 RSV}

If you make a promise to God and you find that circumstances have changed and you are not able to fulfill it, it nevertheless is acceptable, God says, for the intent was in your heart.

How beautifully this is pictured in the Old Testament when David came to God desiring to build a temple for him. But because he was a man of war God would not allow it, and it was Solomon, his son, who finally built the temple. But the credit for the intent to build the temple was given to David throughout all the rest of Scripture. God honored the desire of his heart.

Is pledging wrong? No, for as someone has pointed out, we live on the principle of pledging every day of our life. Every time you turn on an electric light in your home you do so on the basis of a pledge made to the light company that you will pay the bill at the end of the month. Every time you pick up the telephone, every time you use a utility, you are doing so on the basis of a pledge. Yet the amazing thing is, when we come into the realm of our relationship to God, so many people seem to feel it is wrong to make a promise because God will be more hard-hearted than our human creditors are!

What is it, then, that had prevented the fulfillment of this promise in Corinth? I do not think you can read the letters to the Corinthians without seeing the answer. It is very plain. Read that first letter to the Corinthians through again, the letter which has sometimes been called "the painful letter," and you will see that from beginning to end Paul is dealing with a church which is involved in unhealthy activities and wrongful attitudes. There were quarrelings, divisions, contentions, immorality, and even drunkenness at the table of the Lord. It was these carnal preoccupations which had intervened to keep them from fulfilling the promise they had made twelve months before. Twelve long months had gone by from the time they had responded, under an immediate sense of the Spirit's urging, to the plea to meet the desperate need of the saints in Jerusalem; twelve months in which the condition in Jerusalem could only have gotten worse, and still they had not fulfilled their promise. And Paul simply is saying, "Look, when we are involved with God in our giving, there should be an integrity about it that is evidenced by the fulfillment of what we promise, unless, of course, circumstances simply make it impossible to do so."

I wonder if this is not the reason so many of us fail in our pledges and promises? We make them in a spirit of earnest sincerity, willing to give. We commit ourselves to a promise of missionary support, or of help for some special need, or of the undergirding of the need of the church, but carnal preoccupations coming in funnel off our funds into other channels and we discover that we have not enough to meet our commitments. All Paul is saying is: Remember that in giving, a truly spiritual matter to be done in the power of the Holy Spirit, one unmistakable mark of the Spirit's presence is faithfulness! The fruit of the Spirit, remember, is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, and then faith. Faith should be translated "faithfulness" or "fidelity." One of the marks of the Spirit-led person is that he keeps his promise. He is faithful. When he says he will be at a place, he will be there. When he says he will participate in an activity, he shows up. He can be counted on. He is dependable. And one of the disturbing things is the ease with which Christians fail to fulfill their promises, not only in giving, but about everything, even to taking part in a program, or being at a place, or saying that they will do something. But especially there must be an integrity about giving that meets the demands that we have agreed to and fulfills our promises before God.

Now his first characteristic was in the form of an example, his second an exhortation, his third is an explanation which immediately follows, in Verse 13:

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance should supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack." {2 Cor 8:13-15}

Here is an explanation intended to establish an equality determined by conditions. That is the third mark of true Christian giving. As we have seen in previous studies, there is a universality about Christian giving. "Let every one of you" {1 Cor 16:2 KJV}, Paul says. There is an inclusiveness here that leaves no one out. All are to participate in this. But God never means the rich to bear the whole burden, or a few individuals, or one group alone. There is an equality expected and Paul is pointing out that this must be properly balanced. Certainly no one can read the Bible without realizing that no believer has the right to enjoy this world's goods while his brother is in need. That is very clear, is it not? James says so and John agrees. "If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" {cf, 1 Jn 3:17}. "Don't tell me you love God," he says, "if you know that your brother is in need and you are doing nothing about it; don't say you love God! Your songs about God, your prayers to God are utterly meaningless while this naked fact remains: your brother is in need and you are doing nothing about it." One side of this matter of giving is that in prosperity we are to relieve the needs of others. But there is another side as well. In adversity we are to receive the gifts of others.

Here is something that is very seldom touched upon. I find often that Christians who are in need, genuinely in need, out of a mistaken sense of pride, refuse to accept the gifts of others. They feel they are receiving charity, and they will have nothing to do with charity. That reflects, of course, a complete misunderstanding of that wonderful word *charity*. Charity is simply another word for love. It is wrong, in the mistaken pride of our hearts, to refuse the offer of love. Paul says this is not to be. It reveals an unscriptural and carnal pride.

This week I was in one of the waiting rooms of a hospital and seated next to us was a party of three or four people who were talking so everyone in the room could hear what they were saying. I do not know the background or circumstances, but one man was talking to the others about a third party, whom they all seemed to know, evidently a woman who had fallen into real need. The friends of this woman had sent her help, anonymously, and the man said, "Do you know what her husband did? In his mistaken pride he actually hired a detective to trace down these gifts in order that he might pay back every cent of it. He wouldn't be beholden to anyone!"

Unfortunately that attitude is sometimes true of Christians, and Paul is pointing out that this is not right. In the family of God there is to be an equality so that your abundance at one time may be the means of supplying another's need, for there may very well come a day when, a change of fortune occurring, you may be the one in need and their abundance shall supply your need. This is in clear accord with the basic relationship of members of the body of Christ.

To illustrate this, Paul quotes from the Old Testament the story of the manna that fell in the wilderness. He pictures the man who went forth with greed in his heart to gather this wonderful substance up and to fill his tubs, his crocks, his pots and his pans with this delicious stuff called *manna*. *Manna* means "what is it?" They did not know what it was so they called it "What is it?" Paul quotes, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack." Here was a man who went out and gathered all he could get, hoping to have an abundance of this wonderful food. But those who gathered like that, in greed, found that what they could not use in one day turned to a foul mass of corruption, while for those who gathered little, God met their need by the sharing of others and there was an abundance. Those who gathered little had no lack. Paul is simply saying that if we fail to give in prosperity, God will curse what we have and make it become a curse to us. It will become a foul mass. If we attempt to accumulate more than we actually need and do not give that which is in abundance with us, it shall turn, in the providence of God, to cursing in our hands. On the other hand, if we fail to receive in adversity, God will judge us for our carnal, stubborn pride.

This matter of giving strikes deeply, does it not? It involves the attitudes of our whole heart and life and reaches out to include a recognition of our corporate life together. There is an equality in this.

Now his fourth mark is in the form of an exposition. In Chapter 9, beginning with Verse 6,

The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. As it is written,

**"He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."**

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; {2 Cor 9:6-11 RSV}

And he ends this section in Verse 15:

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! {2 Cor 9:15 RSV}

This is an exposition based upon a natural principle of life, a law of life, which Paul quotes in Verse 6, "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." That is a law of life. In other words, this matter of giving is so related to life that it follows exactly the same laws. Any of you raised on a farm know that in order to have a crop you must plant a crop, and he who sows sparingly shall reap sparingly, while he who sows bountifully reaps bountifully. There is no arguing with that.

But this is true also of giving. Here is the fourth distinctive of true giving. He outlines here a reciprocity which leads to enrichment. Now reciprocity is a simple word which means "to return in kind." When you give, God gives. As a prominent Christian industrialist puts it, "When I shovel out, God shovels in, and the Lord has a bigger shovel than I have." Now if you read this as though Paul is saying, "The more money I give, the more money I will make" and you intend to use this principle as a means of material increase, you will find that you are heading for spiritual disaster, for this is not what he means.

What is the seed that he is talking about here? "He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly." "He who supplies seed to the sower," and "bread for food..." What is he talking about? What is this that we sow in giving? You say, it is money. No, it is not money. It is money only as money may be the material expression of something else which is the true seed. What is it that you sow when you give? Love! The gift only means something if it is a gift given in love. That is why he gives us this reminder in Verse 7, "Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver, a cheerful, enthusiastic, loving giver." That is what you sow, and what he is saying (now follow me) is, if you sow love in giving, God will pour love back into your life in abundance, in many forms. Some of it may be material wealth because God's goodness to us is often expressed in material abundance. "He giveth us all things richly to enjoy," Paul says. But it will all be evidences and expressions of God's love for you.

You sow love and you will reap love back, for love is what enriches life, is it not? What is life worth without love? Nothing! We feel that if there is no love life is not worth living. Love is that which enriches life and, in verse eleven, the apostle says, "You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God."

Some of you here feel unloved. I know you do, you have said so. You feel that your life is lacking in this essential ingredient to make it worthwhile, rich, warm. Your lives are barren and cold and a burden to you and a burden to others because of the missing element of love. Now, I suggest you try, then, this simple formula that the apostle gives. Sow love and you will reap love. You who feel that love is lacking, find someone around you and begin to help. An overworked mother, perhaps, who never gets a chance to get away from the continual demands of a brood of children. Take those children and baby sit them for an hour or two and let her have a free moment. Find an underprivileged child and send him to camp this summer, pay his way. Think of some exhausted Sunday School teacher who has been laboring for years without relief in taking care of your children and relieve her for the summer. Take a lonely missionary who is hungering for word from someone, write to him and supply his need, both emotional and material. And when you have finished that deed, turn,

and find another. This is the simple formula for blessing.

Sow! You cannot reap unless you sow. And he who shows sparingly will reap sparingly. He who sows abundantly will reap abundantly. Jesus said it, "Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom," {Luke 6:38a KJV}. This is the law of life.

When Joe Blinco was with us a number of years ago, he told us a story of a Christian leader, a prominent Christian man, who was speaking, on one occasion, to a group of ladies. He was giving his Christian testimony. He told how he came to Christ as a boy in his teens, how the Lord met him, delivered him, and saved him. Shortly after his conversion he went to a large city to seek for work. It was in the middle of the Depression and work was very scarce. In the joy of his new-found faith the first place he looked up was a church. The first Sunday night he went to church they were having a missionary meeting, and he told of the powerful appeal that was made from the pulpit for contributions to send out a missionary into a needy field. They took up an offering to accomplish this need. He said that he sat there in the audience and he had in his pocket, he knew, one silver dollar, all the money he had in the world. He knew that he would have to live on that dollar (it went a lot further in those days than now) for the next few days while he was looking for work. He said he could, at the same time, feel a tremendous pull of the Spirit in his life and heart to contribute to this need, but all he had was the dollar. The plate was passed up and down the rows and gradually it draw closer to him. He struggled with his desire to give and his feeling that he simply could not give when all he had was a dollar. But, he said, as the plate drew close to him he felt that the Spirit of God was urging him to venture his all. He said to these ladies, "I reached in my pocket and I took out that silver dollar, all I had in the world, and I laid it on the plate and gave my all to Jesus Christ, expecting God to meet my need."

He went on to tell how God did meet his need. how someone met his physical need that night and the next morning a job came along, and he said that he then promised God that he would give faithfully and regularly of his income. God had greatly blessed him and now he was standing before them in testimony to the faithfulness of a God who gave in response to a giving heart. He had now come to a place of prominence, of power, influence, and wealth. And, as he was standing there before these ladies, a woman in the audience looked up at this wealthy Christian man, affluent, powerful, well dressed, and she said to him, "I dare you to do it again!"

Now, why not? Why not? This is the venture of faith that God calls us to. It is to step out on the promise that he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply our resources and increase the harvest of our righteousness, so that we will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

Prayer

Write these words, our Father, upon our hearts. Let them be not just a sermon but a call from heaven to submit ourselves to the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, to give ourselves first to the Lord and then to every need that legitimately makes its appeal to us, that we may demonstrate in this world of self-centered, flesh-sacrificing love. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

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